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A preferred vision for leading elementary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

As a future educator, I feel the world is in dire need of quality educators to provide leadership far more superior than the previous generations. Education as a profession must involve leaders who can consistently perform to the highest level of expectation day in and day out. As students graduate and enter the workforce, the professions within this workforce entrust educators and exemplary leaders to provide honesty, support and encouragement to our fellow prize holders (our students).

A PREFERRED VISION FOR LEADING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

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Seabron R. Reese

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As a future educator, I feel the world is in dire need of quality educators to provide leadership far more superior than the previous generations.

Everything that I have involved myself in, whether it is in the classroom or in life, I have tried to emerge myself as a leader. My career goals are to attain the necessary tools to perform in the school system effectively. After developing a craft of effective teaching, I plan to obtain a position of leadership. The desire that burns from within is genuine because money is not the primary objective. Many teachers and administrators chose education as a career because of a true passion for student achievement and not because of a monetary award.

We must teach in a classroom prior to promotion in order to become a successful administrator or principal. While teaching, we need to analyze, utilize and appreciate all dynamics of pedagogy such as working with students and learning about faculty and supporting staff. Once the necessary first hand experiences are obtained as a teacher, promotion to administration should be a smooth process.

In contradiction to earlier generations, there is a fading desire to teach and become an effective leader in the school system as well as in the community. With the continuous downsizing of the educational budget due to unknown cuts, teachers have to work more with less. As resources become more and more scarce, students will become more and more deprived of a complete

education. My driving motivation to become involved in the area of educational leadership is to make sure that I help preserve and increase the desire of educators so students can and will succeed.

In my junior year in high school, one of my teachers asked me to consider teaching. When I asked why, I was informed that I possess a strong influence over my peers and I actually apply lessons learned instead of memorizing for tests. My teacher further added that people listen to me when I spoke and many could learn from me. I never paid much attention to my teacher's encouragement until I reached college. I wanted to work with teenage kids, but I also wanted to pursue psychology. I was advised to enter child psychology, but I wanted to work with adolescents in an educational and not a medical setting. I also wanted to converse with students en route to adulthood. Therefore, education was for me.

What made me abstain was that most of my teachers in high school were overweight, and I did not want to work in a business office or on Wall Street. I am too energetic to sit at a desk for 8-16 hours a day. Therefore, physical education became the subject at hand in the realm of education. This was very beneficial to me because not only did I refuse to sit at an office job all my life, I did not want to wear suits everyday. I could be physically active, teach students about their health, and give them guidance toward life as they enter adulthood. From that realization alone I became certified as a physical

educator who can teach health, anatomy and driver's education. As a bonus, I was able to come to class in workout apparel as my professional attire.

I have always felt that as a human being, we should know about our body and how it works. In the near future, physical education will reemerge as a primary focus as our children become more and more obese. Therefore, it will be the responsibility of the physical education department to instill in students that healthy lifestyles are essential to longer and fulfilling lives.

I was always asked as a child what I wanted to be when I grew up. I, along with many of my other classmates, would have our various answers. Little did I realize that for any of it to happen, I would have to receive knowledge of that career through the education of teachers. I feel that the strongest, most influential and trusted profession today is teaching. I feel the teaching profession gives birth to millions of other careers. A teacher serves as a second parent (or primary parent for some children). I have no problem serving as a child's second parent because I know that somewhere in a child's format of thinking, I may be the only person who saves him or her from either being in jail, committing suicide or becoming unsuccessful in life. I want to become that individual that children view as a role model or that person in statements such as "It was because of him that I have done...."

I know the time will come when I will expand to broader populations of individuals. Therefore, I am in the principalship program. With plans to

move into the principalship position, I need to prepare now rather than later in life. With this, I feel that I will have a stronger influence on not just one class at a time, but the school as a whole. My influence will impact students, teachers and staff. I feel that leaders should always explore ways to improve themselves. Improving as a leader will result in people looking to me as a leader.

Promoting Community Involvement

Many people believe schools are mirror images of their communities. Many students are commuted into school by bus while many who are within walking distance attend the school in their community. The parents of these same students may have attended these schools when they were being educated. With this being said, the culture, traditions and mores of surrounding communities are major components to what builds schools from the inside out. So as a principal (old or new), why would one decide to run a school effectively and not take into account the environment from which the students come? As a principal, Ward & Burke (2004) make a valid point that "school leaders must evaluate the social and environmental contexts of a school's practices to define the existing school staff's culture and norms when working with students" (p. 2). They further state, "The student should be the centerpiece for defining a school's culture, because the student is the chief client served by the educational profession" (p. 2). Therefore, any principal

who expects to lead without understanding and implementing the involvement of the school and its relation with the community jeopardizes the maximal effectiveness of the school as a whole.

Parental & Community Involvement in School

Parents and community should constantly be involved in the school.

Thinking in futuristic terms, I know there is a life beyond high school.

Knowing this, students have the option to attend college, serve in the military, or work within the community. Many teachers will in time teach children of former students; as some may never leave the community in which they attended school.

First and foremost, there must be a connection and understanding between schools and the community. Certain expectations are placed upon schools from the community and vice versa. A major conflict between schools and community occur when the expectations do not meet. This can be further explained as Lilyquist (1998) states "in each community, residents say they want good education, but the communities do not share a common definition, and the residents within each community do not share a common understanding of what a good school is" (p. 45).

Ways to promote the involvement in the community are through career enrichment programs where representatives from various companies speak to students about their profession. This could not only give the external

community an insight of what is going on in the school, but also the school can see what goes on in “the real world.”

As a principal in high school, utilizing the community can help increase academic achievement (and possibly behavior) with the access of various outside recreational clubs and organizations. Community access is needed in the every community, especially for at-risk adolescents and those in the lower socio-economical bracket who are in danger of dropping out. At-risk students drop out based on the lack one or more of the five entities stated by Lilyquist (1998): community/community members, parents, students, state government and/or national government (p. 62). For adolescents coming from a deprived background but are encouraged to graduate and go to college, Burt, Resnick and Novick (1998) state:

It seriously conflicts with the realities for youth from households at the bottom of the income distribution, many of whom perceive that prosperity is out of reach and that even a steady job paying enough to rise above the poverty level may not be on the horizon. (p. 27)

With this in mind, the community and school must work together toward providing a positive but realistic education for these students.

An underlying taboo that schools have in relation to working with students who attend school and have no home to go to afterwards. An overwhelming percentage of high schools have students in attendance that are declared

homeless. According to Helvie and Kunstmann (1999), homeless is defined as “those persons who lack resources and community ties necessary to provide their own adequate shelter” (p.7). Helvie and Kunstmann (1999) from the Ohio Department of Mental Health establishes homeless as “those living in extremely substandard housing such as flop houses or single room-occupancy hotels if they only have sufficient resources to reside in these places less than 45 days and consider themselves homeless” (p. 7). These are some of the students who may be on free or reduced lunch and school lunch may serve as their only meal for the day. So another aspect of the principalship is to collaborate with the community as much as possible to combat and bring about success to some of these issues.

Reaching Out is Our Duty

The school’s responsibility is to reach out to parents and the community to provide necessary school information. Marzano (2003) states, “The National Educational Association points out that parents have no obligation to communicate with the school. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the school to initiate communication and provide an atmosphere in which parents desire such communication” (p. 48). Knowing the miscommunication between community and school mentioned by Lilyquist, the principalship should develop various settings in which the community can access events in the school. A solid connection with the YMCA/YWCA, Boys and Girls Club,

Salvation Army, church organizations, extracurricular activities and On the Job Training programs is just one way that can serve as an eye opener to the community and school. Working with after school programs will help provide students with a place to go and furthermore keep them off the streets and making poor choices outside of school.

Another way to incorporate the community in ties with the school will be to provide a page of all current events going on at the school in the local newspapers. In small districts, it is possible to have a 1 or 2 minute section on the news per week to disseminate information through television and radio stations. The journalism and yearbook staff on campus can join together to develop a bi-weekly or monthly newsletter for students, faculty, staff and community for an up-to-date report of what is taking place within the school. Also, developing and maintaining a school website with the most current information can keep parents and community members cognizant of what events are presently taking place and what is to come in the future. Working with these areas can greatly promote the events and accomplishments of the school in relation to the community. This way, when the local television stations run the headline news at 11 o'clock, the school will be observed in a more positive light.

As a principal and leader, reform and innovations evolve from one simple vision and becomes a reality when it is produced into statistical or other

convincing formats for others to visualize and follow. Webber (1999) makes a valid statement that, “visions are conceptualizations, but they become real as leaders express them in concrete terms”

(<http://www.leadershipletters.com/letters/letter6.htm>). So as an exemplary leader in the field of education, the first ISSL Standard representing visionary leadership should be thoroughly utilized as well as the practice of inspiring a shared vision so the overall goal of student success can be achieved.

Manage the Organization

As a leader, there are two areas in which an organization can be run. One is through leading and the other through management. Dunklee (2000) defines the two:

A leader is an individual who utilized existing structures or procedures to achieve an organizational goal or objective. The manager is concerned primarily with maintaining, rather than changing established structures, procedures or goals. The leader is concerned with initiating changes in established structures, procedures or goals and is a disrupter of existing states of affairs. (p. 89)

A leader takes the steps necessary to make an organization grow along a continuum, while the manager makes sure that everything remains steady. Every exemplary leader is (or should be) a great manager, but not all managers are exemplary leaders. When ensuring that the faculty and staff

have cohesiveness to work together toward a particular goal, leaders assume the forefront position in converting that goal into an accomplishment.

A solid, strong and committed organization is one of the first priorities to achieve student achievement. Developing interpersonal relationships is a vital component toward uniting faculty and staff so that all are in accordance with each other when achieving goals. This is also a vital component in the third and fourth ISSL standards of organizational and collaborative leadership. In every school, there will be a percentage of teachers who feel they are only there for kids and nothing more. These individuals are seen as those who may come in right before school starts and as soon as the dismissal bell rings, they are running out the door. Student achievement suffers when these faculty fail to develop interpersonal skills with others. Faculty and staff must have cohesiveness and develop a trusting bond with each other in order to cultivate more of a consistency in goals and objectives. The ability to work as a team can and will make life easier for all. An easier life equivocates less stress and lessens the likelihood of burnout. In support of this reflection, Gold and Roth (1999) states:

Our personal relationships help to shape our lives and to give life meaning. We are influenced by our meaningful personal relationships and somewhat by our friendships. We benefit from successful relationships and we grow and mature through the encouragement and guidance from

people we respect. Our psychological health depends on our ability to build and maintain interdependent, cooperative relationships with others. The supportive relationships in our life help us to reduce our psychological distress and to cope more effectively with stressful situations. We develop more resilience to handle problems in life, and we become more self-reliant through the encouragement and support given by others. (p. 150)

Attention Deficits Do Not Stop Once a Child Graduates

The fastest growing special education diagnoses today are Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) as Bartlett, Weisenstein, and Etscheidt (2002) state:

The U.S. Department of Education reported that the largest percentage of increases in the number of students with disabilities served under the IDEA occurred in OHI. The states' most common explanation for the greater numbers was increased identification of and service to children with attention deficit disorder (ADD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). (p. 333)

As teachers pass these students through the proceeding grades, many faculty fail to understand that some students do not outgrow this disorder. What they further fail to realize is that many of these ADD/ADHD students become professionals and active citizens in our communities. In addition to this, many

principals are not cognizant that some of these same students attend college and come back as teachers. If principals would recognize this with our teachers, it would be much easier to manage the organization. Teachers can easily recognize (or misdiagnose) children when they cannot focus on their assignments and cause distractions throughout class, but never take into account that many adults display the same characteristics. Lubit (2004) provides several adult ADHD characteristics:

Restlessness: always on the go, uncomfortable when inactive

Attention problems: forgetful, tends to lose things, has difficulty concentrating on reading or conversations, is easily distracted

Unstable mood: shifts from normal mood to excitement, depression or boredom

Irritability/temper: prone to outbursts that damage relationships

Emotionally Over reactive: easily stressed out

Disorganized: poorly organized in work and time management

Impulsive: interrupts, talks excessively, speaks before thinking, acts on feelings before thinking things through and then says or does things that are ill advised (p. 276)

Understanding that certain people possess these characteristics will make principals further analyze what assignments should be delegated to certain teachers. Lubit (2004) further concludes that principals and/or department

leaders in regards to these adults should assign tasks that enable them to often get up and move around and that depends on their skills (p.279).

One goal as a future principal is to develop a strong, consistent and united faculty and staff by diagnosing each professional's strengths and deficiencies. Locating these critical strengths help to prevent future distress when putting specific people in leadership positions. For principals, various leadership assessments such as the Life Styles Inventory (1990) can be administered to all teachers to pinpoint various leadership strengths and weaknesses. This way, not only does delegation become much easier, but also team grouping and partnerships are more successful.

To achieve this, great deals of visionary and organizational leadership (ISSL standards one and four) are needed. Understanding each teacher and supporting staff is paramount as a principal. Working in collaboration with other administrators will further expedite the cohesiveness and understanding of the school as a whole.

Collaboration with Community and Parents

One thriving area that remains untapped in schools today is the collaboration with outside stakeholders. Parents, our most important stakeholder (aside from our students), are most neglected in having input about how education can be improved. Schools typically do not utilize all resources within the community to help ensure that students achieve success.

Many educational leaders fail to realize that academic achievement is not solely confined to school hours. Brabeck, Walsh & Latta (2003) support this viewpoint by stating, "Collaboration is a unique strategy with enormous potential for schools, community agencies, and school-agency relationships. Unfortunately, collaborations full potential remains untapped because its unique features, requirements, benefits, and contingencies have not been described precisely and coherently" (p. 45).

Many students learn valuable lessons about life outside of the school environment. So educators should make a valiant effort to collaborate with outside agencies and stakeholders to help ensure that education expands beyond the walls of the school.

In the world that is reality, there will never be a school where all students raise their hands to answer a teacher's question, or behave appropriately in and outside of supervision. The conceptualization that no school exists where all students attend class everyday with no truancy cases, fights, vandalism or violence should also be in place. In contrast, there are many who come into the teaching profession thinking this utopia exists. In the world we live in, many parents believe their kids over teachers when there is a conference about the child's behavior or academic performance. Though parents should have a partnership with teachers, many teachers do not know the students' parents or guardians. Skrla and Scheurigh (2003) states:

When educators typically think about parents, we most often do not see them as partners, equal partners, who have as much say about what education should look like as do educators. The dominant assumption has been 'just give us your children'. (p. 121)

With this mindset, there may be teachers who feel as if they are babysitters for six to seven periods a day. Principals must take teacher/parent partnerships into consideration when analyzing student achievement.

Levels of Collaboration

The first area of contact when trying to collaborate with the community is the parent of every student attending the school. Many of the student's parents have professions and can serve as a representative from their workplaces to work in conjunction with our classrooms and subjects. Once the parents have demonstrated significant impacts on students by (a) taking control and establishing a value of achievement and, (b) foreshadowing tidbits of the 'real world' by explaining their career viewpoints and volunteering to work with teachers, the next step is to (c) manifest into the community. Every aspect of collaboration is demonstrated throughout the fourth ISSL standard of collaborative leadership.

Community venues such as the local recreational centers, clubs, talent-search agencies and churches that students attend daily are outside resources influencing student achievement. Pastors, deacons and members of churches

would (and should) be more than willing to participate in the success of a student that attends his or her church. In support of this statement, Skrla and Scheurigh (2003) state, "Some church members are retired teachers who would like to come back and help teach in some areas" (127). Having a hand in the success of individuals gives all a sense of ownership ensuring their community thrives.

After establishing a foundation of support from the parent and surrounding community, major corporations should be contacted. Major corporations have funding for schools in need or various projects to improve student achievement. Top business firms who are in search of quality investments can award specific grants to fund school resources. Connecting schools and major corporations can be done by having a grant writing team develop what is needed for the school and what funds should be allocated to what are valid necessities. One in particular is the K-12 Educational Giving (2004) by the 3M Corporation. Its primary focus is to increase student achievement in math, science and economics while connecting everyday life and future careers to inspire students to pursue higher education

(http://solutions.3m.com/wps/portal/_l/en_US/_s.155/139410/_s.155/140024).

Another educational grant is the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation (2004), which engage in programs and proactive initiatives to improve education in Idaho (<http://jkaf.org/index.html>). These are just a couple of the

many grants that a team could assemble toward community involvement for the success of students.

Working with other faculty, parents, small community leaders and major corporations, collaborative leadership is displayed at its finest. The levels of interaction with the outer community as well as the interaction from within can make a world of difference for students. Building a rapport with parents and outside stakeholders shows a great deal of visionary leadership, one in which many schools and leaders fail to understand. As exemplary leaders, principals should develop all of these connections to ensure that the successes of the primary stakeholders (students) are not placed solely on the clients (teachers).

School Integrity

I remember as a student I would wear my high school t-shirt with pride everywhere I went. I made it known to everyone everywhere that I was a proud representative of my school. Students having pride and integrity in the school in which they attend helps to improve the environment and the culture of their school. Having school integrity works two-fold as it serves as one of the few positive traits about a school that develops in school and transcends school grounds. This is the reason as to why we have pep rallies and other functions before sporting events and major competitions. School spirit builds

integrity not just within the school itself, but the individuals who make up the school.

So What is Integrity Anyway

Integrity is a positive characteristic that I believe all should possess. As a principal, I believe that the students and faculty who attend school should demonstrate the level of integrity that will develop and maintain a safe and positive environment from the classrooms to the schoolyard. The possibility of influencing all students and faculty to develop and maintain a high sense of integrity is highly unlikely. There are many factors influencing individuals not to act with “integrity”. For these people, is there an explanation for the need to act virtuously? We live in an environment where Spencer (1996) shows that 61% of high school and 32% of college students admit to cheating on an exam at least once (p. 73). In addition to the statistics, there are individuals who receive pleasurable emotions after committing crimes or seeing others fail. So what can principals and exemplary leaders do to instill virtue in all?

What I believe as an exemplary leader is that righteousness must start from within and must be demonstrated through our actions. We must show that virtuous acts result in positive outcomes. Ramsay (1997) explains:

Virtuous acts are done because it is pleasurable to do good, and not because they are virtuous, not ‘for the sake of virtue’. Nor is morality a

single standard of goodness, but otherwise what we are required to do is to exercise common sense judgments of utility in pursuit of a diversity of ends including self-interest, family life, friendship, vocations and special obligations. (p. 96)

Principals must design programs that encourage positive actions toward one another for the sake of personal pleasure. Leaders of this profession must express the explanation that one can progress life when collaborating and assisting others.

Instilling integrity in students must start from the moment they enter school in kindergarten through high school graduation. Entering high school as first semester freshmen, there should be leadership orientation classes focused on developing young adolescents into productive school citizens. All enrolled students will have a final exam engaging the whole school in a service project in which they have to implement in order to receive a passing grade. After the initial orientation class, each following grade level will be responsible for producing a school wide project or activity involving the whole school. This initiative alone may provide the students with a sense of ownership in the school and its functions. Whether it is a student versus faculty game in flag football, a grade versus grade field day or a simple pie-eating contest, as long as the students have the authority of making it a reality will in turn provide a better sense of morality among the student body.

Enabling students to act as a group and succeeding demonstrates exemplary and ethical (the fifth ISSL standard) leadership from all areas from the student body to the administration.

Emitting Positive Vibes Even When It Is Not Positive

Acting with confidence even when one does not feel very confident demonstrates a strong characteristic of that individual. A common saying told to me was that one should not visibly show when one is having a bad day because it can easily rub off on others. With this age-old theme, I have personally rubbed off on many who may have experienced a bad day into realizing that life is not as bad as it seems. This applies to all (teachers and students) when engaging in everyday interpersonal experiences. Horn (2004) makes a valid statement about continuing despite the lack of confidence. He concludes:

Feeling follows action, not the other way around. If we want to feel more confident, the most direct and dramatic way to achieve that is to adopt an 'aura of authority'- a body posture that says 'I'm in charge of myself and comfortable in my own skin'. (p. 205)

If we could include lessons involving issues such as this in the orientation classes, who knows how many lives may be turned around for the better.

Acting with confidence and integrity can be found interwoven into standard five of our ISSLC standard of ethical leadership. Integrity with

confidence promotes integrity and confidence as it can grow from one person to another. If future principals and leaders want high achievement and self-esteem levels among all students, the motivation to do so must start from within. As stated earlier by Horn, feelings follow action, principals must understand that exemplary leaders cannot engage or disengage in various initiatives on emotion alone, but take the steps necessary to reap the rewards upon accomplishment.

Conclusion

Education as a profession must involve leaders who can consistently perform to the highest level of expectation day in and day out. As students graduate and enter the workforce, the professions within this workforce entrust educators and exemplary leaders to provide honesty, support and encouragement to our fellow prize holders (our students). I will always remain devoted to my profession and continue to improve as not only an exemplary educator and leader, but as a role model for others to follow.

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